

**...that in Japan over the past two decades families and “professional deprogrammers” have abducted thousands of individuals to force them to renounce their chosen beliefs?**

Most of those abducted have been from the Unification Church, Jehovah’s Witness, and other new religious movements. Abductees describe being confined against their will, suffering psychological harassment and physical and, in some cases, sexual abuse. In some extreme cases, individuals were held for years, including the 12 year confinement of Unification Church member Toru Goto.

The Japanese Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and protects citizens against false imprisonment, and Japan has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Nevertheless, Japanese authorities continue to see these cases as “family matters” and are reluctant to intervene. In most abduction cases, police and judicial authorities neither investigate nor indict those responsible for these acts, often citing lack of evidence.

Religious groups have found some success in waging legal battles against those who carry out the abductions, and the past decade has seen a dramatic drop in the number of abductions for the purpose of de-conversion. Forced de-conversions among Jehovah’s Witness largely stopped after an August 2002 court case declared their “deprogramming” illegal and several other cases resulted in civil judgments against “professional deprogrammers.”

The legal challenges made by the Unification Church have not been as successful, and there continue to be reports of abductions of members each year. However, in March, 2013 the civil case of Toru Goto opened with testimony about his 12 year confinement during which family members tortured and allegedly nearly starved him to death. The case has garnered media attention both in Japan and internationally, as well as the attention of Japanese legislators. A judgment in favor of Toru Goto may continue the decrease in the number of forced de-conversion cases, as well as motivate police and judicial authorities to pursue criminal charges against those who kidnap and mistreat members of new religious movements.